

Encore by Jupiterstorm

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Summary:

Mike Wheeler and El Hopper are juniors in college who have never met. While neither of them has any interest in the theater, circumstances lead them both to enroll in an introductory acting course. Will these different people follow through on their immediate connection, or will their complicated backgrounds prevent them from ever masterfully portraying their feelings to one another?

1. Overture

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances...*

-- William Shakespeare, "As You Like It"

August 28, 1991, 1:15 PM

Mike Wheeler's eyes stopped.

That was unusual. He was a scientist in training, after all. His eyes never just stopped entirely. They were forever searching, pondering, seeking out questions and answers and pulling apart every small detail. They never had the time to stop.

Until they met her.

She walked slowly up the steps to the black box stage before them. There was a quietness and shyness to her step, as though she could not possibly be less comfortable in this space. His heart skipped a beat; he felt that was already something that they shared, and, even seconds after looking at her, he was glad that he could find some immediate commonality.

Her eyes were focused on the ground for the few steps it took to approach the center of the stage as their instructor advised her to do. Then, in a moment of awkward silence, he saw them look up. There was a big, expressive, beautiful shine to them, as frightened and vulnerable as they appeared in that moment. The light shining in them brought out their liquid caramel hazel gleam, and Mike's persistent focus made him realize she didn't know where to land them. She just looked blankly into the light.

Her hair fell in loose curls around her face, bordering it like a fresh fall wreath. It wasn't like the hair he saw on other girls at Rathenhaus University; covered in hair spray and puffy with the harsh treatment of a permanent, or crunchy and fake from the heat of a crimping iron. It fell softly, beautifully, and naturally, as though it

hadn't even been touched with a brush, but didn't have to, because it fell in gentle, sweet cascades alongside her soft jawline without any effort whatsoever.

The rest of her also seemed very different from other girls. Her body, which seemed slight and trim, was hidden in a loose pair of jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. Her hands hid under the cuffs of her sweatshirt sleeves, with only her bent, shaking fingers appearing every so often, fidgeting with the cuffs almost manically.

He felt his own hands fidget in his lap...

Another commonality.

She breathed in deeply, in a way that appeared focused and intentional. It seemed like the kind of breathing exercise that Mike himself had practiced a few years ago when he started therapy after his Dad left. In slowly, out like blowing out birthday candles.

She turned to the professor, with a "Well, what do I do now?" expression on her face.

Mike heard voices behind him – Troy and James, who lived in the next dorm over, and who he was less than pleased to have in the class with him, whispering.

"She'd be hot if she wasn't hiding behind that sweater."

"Yeah. I bet she's hiding something really sweet underneath."

Mike rolled his eyes. Just like them.

(Not that the smallest little piece of him didn't wonder about that. But he'd never say that. Never out loud where other people could actually hear it).

"So, tell us about yourself," the professor advised, a big smile on her face.

The girl's shoulders shrugged, her eyes glossing over, as though she was about to cry.

He wanted to do something...

“What’s your name?” a voice came from nowhere, and, seconds after uttering it, he realized that it was his own.

Everyone turned to him, hardly daring believe that Mike – Mike Wheeler – that dorky RA physics major who was always stopping everyone’s fun – would ever interrupt another student in the midst of a class.

Then he realized that she spotted him, too, and he felt his face flush the deepest shade of red.

Their eyes met, and a surge of electricity pulsed through every inch of his body. Those liquid caramel drops of beauty – which he noticed mere seconds before, softened, and looked grateful and surprised. She awkwardly grinned, as though she wasn’t sure what else to do, and then looked down before she turned back to her professor again.

“El. My name is El.”

August 7, 1991

El looked nervously at Hop alongside her.

He was biting his lip.

He didn’t do that often, but when Hop bit his lip, that meant that he was nervous about something. He was the Chief of Police. He was a Vietnam veteran. He took her in despite all the baggage that came along with her. He didn’t scare easily.

And yet, there he was, biting his lip anyway.

She took a deep breath in.

In for one...two...three...full seconds...

Out like blowing out birthday candles.

“It won’t be that bad, kid,” she heard him say, and the part inside of her that was prompting her heart to beat like an unsteady bongo drum in her chest felt like laughing at the irony of that statement.

He was saying it wouldn’t be that bad.

He didn’t know.

He had no idea. He wasn’t the one who was about to do something that he feared the most for years, that he had prepared for after years of therapy and assistance, of hoping and praying...

Worse yet, that thing was supposed to be normal.

He didn’t fear normal things the way that she did.

He didn’t fear anything.

She, on the other hand...

“You don’t know that.”

“I do, kid. People go to college all the time. Away from home. In fact, lots of kids like it.”

Kids...

But she wasn’t a kid.

She was 20 years old.

She managed to get her Associate’s degree free and clear of any problem, sitting in the back of lecture halls and never having to leave the safety of her bedroom at Hop’s house. She never had to speak to anyone. She never had to raise her hand.

She never had to be a roommate to a person she didn’t even know and try to think of things to say.

She could never think of things to say...

“El, look, we’ve talked about this...”

“I know...”

“Everyone down at the station, they say you have real potential if you finish up this criminal justice bachelors program...”

Yes.

That she knew. She was good at police work and all tasks of that nature and she knew it.

El could research. She knew about shady characters. She was raised by the worst of one and saw all of the people that he worked with. People who would go so low as to threaten, abuse and use a child to reach their ends and achieve their goal.

If there was one thing she could do, it was research. Spy. Follow the right people. Quietly and sneakily seek out the information that was needed. The station didn't know just how many times Hop asked for her insight on a case and she was able to flawlessly draw a conclusion about where the guilty party may have gone or who they were.

A feeling of elation and complete satisfaction overtook her each time she did.

But this?

This is not what she wanted.

To go to a school far away from Hop – far away from his work and his cases and paperwork that she could pore over while other kids her age were chugging beer and playing video games.

To have to be with other kids her age that she knew nothing about.

To talk...

“...but, El, you can't...you can't succeed in this field if you can't...if you...”

“If I can't talk to people.”

"Exactly," he said, taking out a pack of cigarettes and fidgeting with the cellophane, preparing to light one up right there in the office.

"You're supposed to be quitting," El asserted, looking at him disapprovingly.

"There are extenuating circumstances," Hop muttered, turning his eyes away from her, before courage took over and he faced her again. "Look, I spoke with this advisor over the phone. She's VERY nice. She's going to make sure that you're placed in a situation with someone who would be the best fit for you here. Maybe someone to help take you out of that shell of yours a little bit."

"Yeah, well, good luck," El mumbled, folding her arms tightly.

"That kind of attitude is really going to do you well," Hop grunted, lighting his cigarette and taking a slow, steady drag with the same degree of focus and concentration as El did during her breathing exercise. She was about to tell him how much the smell of his cigarette was adding to her heightened feeling of nausea when the door behind them opened.

A frazzled but kind looking woman in a plain button down blue shirt and grey slacks hurriedly took a seat at the desk before them, her breathing heavy and her eyes wide and crazed as though they'd looked at dozens of other people that day. She had a kind smile. El had to admit that it was very difficult to be afraid of someone who looked like as much of a mess outside as El felt like she was inside.

"Welcome, welcome, thank you so much for your patience..." she looked down at her paper to read El's name. "I'm your advisor, Joyce Byers...Eleanor Jane Hopper, right?"

"Just El," Hopper told her, and El felt relieved. The same request made its way to her mind, but, just as words so often did, they lost themselves on the way to her mouth. Joyce turned to El and extended her hand, as though Hop hadn't spoken. El had to smile back.

"No problem. Pleasure to meet you El."

El took her hand and shook it, words again forming in her mind. She

hesitated.

What was she supposed to say?

You too?

Thank you?

Okay?

What wouldn't sound stupid?

The bongos went off again; she felt sweat droplets start to form all over her skin as she randomly selected one of those choices and went with it.

“Thank you.”

Was that the right one?

Did that sound dumb?

Joyce smiled, affirming that this response was satisfactory. The bongos slowed. El helped herself breathe.

“Okay, so, El, your dad has told me about your circumstances. First let me just say how glad I am that you are showing the courage to start at a new situation. I imagine it must be difficult. Social anxiety disorder is something that other students have faced and it is a difficult hurdle, but we’ve found that the intimate experience of being at a University, especially a small one like this, has helped many of our students to start to overcome their struggles. We hope the same for you, especially since our criminal justice program is nationally accredited and highly praised. This could be a great fit for you.”

El had to smile at that. It felt good to know that she’d at least be taking classes that interested her and brought her one step closer to her goal to be a member of law enforcement and work with Hop, most hopefully in criminal investigations.

“So that being said, we’ve looked at your transcript. You have a great

GPA. Very impressive. You've gotten your associates in criminal justice. You succeeded in fulfilling most of our liberal arts requirements – English 1 and 2, social science with a few psychology courses, a math based class...you're just missing an arts class. Now, as it happens, Hop and your therapist have each reached out to us and they have a similar suggestion. They feel it may be prudent for you to take a theater course."

Theater?

As in acting?

El's face flushed. She couldn't even have a standard conversation with anyone. She had a hard time thinking of words to say to speak to people, let alone perform on stage.

"I...I don't..."

"That's often the response people give when they're reluctant to take theater. But I think that this will do you good, in addition to the fact that it will fulfill your art requirement and allow you to carry on with the program. You do want that, right?"

El froze.

She did. She wanted to get all of those requirements out of her system so that she could focus on what she really wanted.

But she didn't want to act.

She had no idea how to act.

"If you think it'll help, El will do the best she can, won't you El?" Hop interjected. El turned to give him one of her angry looks, but was disgusted to find he wasn't even looking back at her.

His eyes were on Joyce.

They were different.

Oh, no...

He liked her...

No, Hop.

Not my advisor!

Worse?

She was looking back and smiling.

It figured. El was trapped in this nightmare and Hop had the hots for this sadistic advisor who was taking pleasure in forcing her to do things she had no desire to do.

But the matter was decided for her. She was scheduled to take five courses – three criminal justice requirements, an economics class and drama.

Drama.

The last thing she wanted...

Mike had to admit it; he was relieved that his boss Joyce at the advisor's office asked him to come in three weeks early. She needed help scheduling appointments and getting people to sign up for last minute classes, and since all RA's had to be in a week or so early anyway, it was a convenient excuse to get back on campus.

Most of his peers wished to prolong the summer as soon as possible, but Mike was the exact opposite. Being at home in Hawkins, in that oversized house that had been way too big and depressing since his dad left years before, was more frustrating than it was relaxing. With his sister Nancy working in New York far away, it was even emptier. It was now a four-bedroom house with nobody but himself, his eleven-year-old sister Holly, who loved to grate on Mike's nerves out of sheer boredom, and his mom, who was just starting to date again. Mike found it repulsive. All these strange, slimy looking guys in the house trying to woo his mother? He almost felt bad for Holly; he

didn't know how she tolerated it most of the time. So, he tried his best to tolerate her and take her out for ice cream or to the movies, but Holly was an angry preteen and not always as grateful for it as she should be.

Besides, Mike missed activity. He had a part time job over at the pharmacy to pass the time, but he honestly couldn't wait until the next summer when opportunities for real internships would present themselves. There was the junior year apprenticeship in the city lab that Mike had sought after for years. He was hoping Joyce could pull some strings as she suggested she may be able to do for years. He knew her son Will, another student at the college and one of Mike's dorm mates. His closeness with Will, one of his best friends, was sure to help nudge her in the right direction.

She said 9, but Mike knew Joyce and she was an early bird. She got to the office an hour early and liked to get everything done early. That being said, he arrived at her office at 8:30. He was right; she was already sitting at her desk, going through paperwork in her usual intense degree of focus. She didn't even seem to notice he came in.

"Hey Mrs. Byers!" Mike greeted. She jumped, slightly startled, and then gave him a warm smile.

"Mike, you scared me. Sorry, I'm in new admit land. You ready to join me on this adventure today?"

"Glad to," Mike greeted, coming closer to give Mrs. Byers a hug. She wasn't just his boss; she had become a friend over the years and he was so grateful to have her.

And, as a friend, he knew that expression on her face.

There was bad news...

"Mike, I just...I wanted to be the first to tell you something. It's about that internship."

The internship!

Could he have been rejected already?

How would that be possible? Applications weren't due for another four weeks.

"What?" Mike asked worriedly, sitting down quickly and looking at her nervously. "I mean, I didn't miss anything, did they? The deadline's still..."

"No, no, the deadline is still at the end of September, it's just...well, Mike, I was looking with Dr. Steibel at the requirements and it seems that, unless you add a course to your semester, you can't apply."

Couldn't apply?

What could he have possibly missed?

He took all the prerequisite physics courses that were offered at the university. He even got ambitious and took some that weren't required just to look flexible.

"What? But how? I've taken all the physics requirements."

"Physics, yes. You're above and beyond the physics requirements..."

"Right, and I've done research assistant part time jobs and community service, I'm an RA..."

"Yes, yes, all of this is true Mike, but..."

"What could I possibly be missing?"

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

She reached her hand over and placed it gently on his arm, giving him that warm smile that reminded him so much of her son. Will had that similar ability to calm Mike, or anyone in his presence really.

"Breathe. We can fix it. Just listen for a minute, okay?"

Mike nodded. He knew Joyce's polite method of telling him to shut the hell up. She'd gotten used to presenting it.

“While you are a physics major this is a liberal arts university. There are prerequisite courses you have to take in a little of everything to make it to a level two student with a major focus.”

“Right, and I did all of that...”

“Just listen, Mike, please...”

Mike quieted down, cursing himself. He had a big mouth that ran ahead of him. It was more of a problem than it was worth sometimes.

“You took an introduction to art class a few years ago, but you took a “P” on it instead of a grade.”

Mike remembered...that class was brutal. The teacher would spend hours talking about paint on a canvas as though it were anything more than a mess of color. Mike was a practical person; he lacked the patience for anything of such little substance being discussed like it meant something that wasn't blatantly obvious to anyone looking at it. He got into more arguments with that professor than he hoped and, after the professor called him a pretentious little snot in front of the class, he opted to aim for the pass or no credit option. By virtue of renaissance art and portraits that were far more impressive to Mike than any of that abstract nonsense, he managed to pass.

“Right...and I passed.”

“Yes, but if you look at the fine print, Mike, the requirements require that you get a grade in the prerequisites. Pass or no credit options are only acceptable once you're in your major; they can't be used for a requirement. You need another art class.”

No.

Not another art class.

“B-but, I mean...it's not my thing. I'm into science, Mrs. Byers – facts. I can't look at Jackson Pollack and see anything that means something to me, I'm sorry...”

“Okay, but, be that as it may, let's consider options. Art isn't limited to the visual arts. Maybe you need something with more of a

practical application. Something that can help to polish your skills for the field.”

“In art? Like what?”

That smile...that look on Joyce’s face that told him she was going to suggest something he didn’t like but he had to be nice about it because she was smiling like that. He hated that smile.

“There’s a drama class – introduction to acting...”

“I don’t act,” Mike cut in. “I just...that’s not me.”

“Nobody is saying you have to be up for a Tony, Mike, but think about it. Social science has shown repeatedly that theater helps people to learn enhanced empathy and people skills.”

Ouch.

She was hitting him where it hurt there.

One of the most consistent critiques Mike was always hit with was that he didn’t relate well to other people. He was trapped in his narrow line of vision and had to be the leader at all times; he didn’t find it easy to put himself in other people’s shoes and put his opinionated thoughts on hold. He couldn’t dispute that.

“And, of course, you’d have to work on your feet and practice your public speaking. This internship requires you to make group presentations and present proposals to your superiors. Certainly, practice speaking in front of other people, even if it’s in a theatrical context, could help to fine tune these skills.”

Damn.

Why did she have to make so much sense?

All of that was true, and all of that was something that he could discuss in interviews for this internship when the time came.

Still...

“What if I have to do something ridiculous, like pretend I’m a tomato or something?”

Joyce laughed and Mike couldn’t conceal his smile. Her laugh was contagious.

“So be a tomato. Why not try having a little fun? I hear it’s a good thing.”

Mike had fun.

He had plenty of fun.

He and his dorm mates would play D&D for hours or go to the comic book store, or have some beer and watch movies. He knew how to have down time. He could do that.

But, then again...

The others in the dorm that he advised thought he was a drip. He could swear that he heard them laughing at him behind his back more times than he could count. Maybe it would do him good to loosen up a bit.

“So...all I have to do is enroll for this class and I qualify for the internship?”

“Yes. Provided you allow yourself to get a grade. Put in some effort; you don’t want to mess up your Summa Cum Laude potential, do you?”

A grade...

Could he do well in a drama class?

Still, he had no choice. This internship was his dream and his hope for the last couple of years. He could take on a little drama class if it meant he had a shot of winning it.

What could be so hard about that?

August 28, 1991, 7:51 AM

El awoke to noise. Again.

This was nothing unusual. Her roommate Max was usually an early riser doing something. Most often, that noise was the blare of Max's headphones, which you could hear even though they were designed to limit sound to the person wearing it. Sometimes it involved Max using a squeaky sharpie to draw designs on her skateboard before she planned a day of cutting class and skating.

This time, though, it was the sound of another person.

In the mere week they'd been together, it wasn't unusual for Max to bring someone back to the room. She wasn't exactly subtle in her approach to meeting guys on campus. El was sad to discover that her reputation preceded her. Lots of classmates who saw Max walk El to her classes weren't shy about discussing her exploits with El in some attempt to isolate Max even further than they already did.

However, despite Max's bad reputation, El stayed loyal. For one, she was one of the few people that El felt comfortable speaking to. The first week was pulling teeth, but Max was at least sincere. She was easy to talk to, and nobody was easy for El to talk to. For another, her social anxiety was so heightened that, even if she wanted to gossip about Max, which she didn't, her fear in being addressed by girls who behaved like that nearly paralyzed her. More importantly, Max had become her friend, and that was something she couldn't say about a lot of people. That was her roommate, after all. And she may have had her quirks, but her heart was kind. El was an expert on seeing through people. That much was obvious.

So, El tried to ignore the sound of heavy breathing from the other side of the room, as though she weren't even there. Fortunately, it wasn't a panting, heavy breath to suggest something was immediately happening. They must have had their fun the night before in the common room and then come back to bed. She slowly sat up.

Max was up, sitting up and doodling in a journal. The guy next to her – who El had never seen – was lying in a deep sleep, shirtless, completely knocked out.

El met her eyes and shook her head.

“What?” Max asked. “He was at the skate park, okay? He’s a nice guy.”

“Okay, whatever,” El responded, starting to go through her drawers for clothes as she climbed over Max’s mess of clothing scattered on the floor.

“He is. You’d like him. He’s super into poetry. He was quoting Edgar Allen Poe to me.”

“Poe? He’s...dark,” El said. Max laughed as she so often did when El’s few words came out in a way that she found amusing.

“El, you’re a trip. Of course, he’s dark. Why do you think I like him? And, hey, it’s only 8. Where are you going?”

“Library,” El replied, looking at Max and raising her eyebrows. Another great thing about Max is that she read El’s body language. That was El’s way of suggesting that Max should be in the library too.

"You have all day for the library. Go this afternoon."

"Can't. I have class," El replied, hoping to dodge the subject as quickly as possible. Max wasn't having it, though.

“So which class is it today?” Max asked, always interested in El’s pursuit of criminal justice. She was eager to hear about El’s history with the subject and passion about finding people who deserved justice and putting them in their place.

El felt herself turn red. She couldn’t bring herself to say what it was.

“Oh, come on. I’ve got a strong stomach. If you say it’s some forensic class about blood splatter analysis I won’t judge.”

“Drama,” El mumbled, her back turned to Max as she grabbed her brush. Max paused.

“I’m sorry, what? I couldn’t have just heard you right. Did you just say...”

“Drama. I have to take an acting class.” Max paused for a moment, and then started laughing loudly, boisterously, enough to the point that the boy alongside her jumped up, his long brown hair flying behind him as a look of shock crossed his face.

“WHAT?”

“Nothing, nothing Mo. Go back to sleep.”

“Mo?” El asked, trying not to look at the shirtless figure before her. She could barely utter a syllable in front of people in the best of situations; in this awkward context, it was even worse.

“Oh, right. Mo, El, El, Mo. Wow, all these monosyllabic names here.”

There was awkward confusion as El and Mo said a quick hello to each other before El tried excusing herself from the room. She heard Max’s footsteps behind her.

“El, wait! Look, I’m sorry I laughed at you. It’s just...you know, you’re afraid of your own shadow. You do know that you actually have to get up on stage and speak in front of others, right?”

Max was anything but subtle, much like Hop, and it was part of the reason that El found herself liking her more and more.

Still, she was right.

She would have to speak.

On a stage.

In front of people...

“I know. I just...have to. My therapist wants me to.”

“That’s one brutal therapist, right there,” Max replied, her blue eyes looking a bit concerned “Look...do you want me to go with you? Just for the first class? I’ll just make up some story about how I’m working on getting registered but it hasn’t gone through yet.”

El had to smile. That was awfully sweet of Max, but her therapist and

Hop and Joyce were all right. She had to do something to become braver in front of people. She couldn't be terrified her whole life.

"Thanks but...I'll be okay."

With that, El went off to shower and prepare for the day. She'd get through it somehow. She had to.

August 28, 1991, 12:15 PM

"Tell your mom to lie."

"What? Mike, you're insane."

Mike and Will were sitting at the quad on campus having lunch a bit before his first drama class. Mike had come to peace with the idea of having to take this class, but he was starting to lose that sense of peace now that the class was approaching. He was hoping for the slight possibility that Will could somehow get him out of the class, as ridiculous of a notion as he knew that that was.

"Come on. Just tell her to talk to the professor and..."

"Oh, come off it. First of all, I don't get what the big deal is. You love to talk. You'd think that an acting class would be just your speed."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mike asked, his eyes narrowing defensively. The other guys were usually blunt with Mike about how incredibly socially inept he was, but Will was usually far more gentle. It wasn't like him to call Mike on his stupid habits.

"Just what I said. I mean...you're a talker. Is that a bad thing?"

"You think I've got a big mouth too," Mike muttered, turning his attention back to his ham and cheese sandwich, if anything to occupy his mouth with something other than talking.

"That's not a bad thing! I kind of wish I was. I'm not good at knowing what to say to people."

"You think I'm good at knowing what to say to people?" Mike asked. That was certainly surprising. He was usually criticized for being too forward and wearing his heart on his sleeve no matter who it offended.

"Well...in a weird way, yeah. You're always honest. You're totally not fake. I mean, that's good for being on stage, right?"

"No, because I'm not fake! I can't pretend to be...Hamlet or whatever."

"Good, cause there's a theory he's in love with his Mom."

"Ugh! Noted! I won't do any soliloquys from that!" Mike turned in the direction of the arts building in dread, wondering if he had it in him to get on stage and convincingly portray anyone. He didn't even do a good job of being himself.

"Look, you'll be fine," Will reminded him. "It's just a class. Just... don't think of it as a class. Think of it as an experiment of some kind for psych or something. A study of human behavior."

Mike raised his eyebrows in interest.

"How so?"

"Well...what are people like on stage? What are they like off stage? Are certain types of people better actors? What are they like in real life? You could write an essay on it and send it to the college journal; it'd be another resume builder under your belt."

Not a bad idea.

Leave it to Will.

"You're a genius, Will," Mike said. "And...I could gather data. Like, they wouldn't know it."

"Exactly!" Will continued.

"I can try to run stats like – find the correlation between the number of friends people have in the class with quality of their acting using a

Likert scale.”

“Hmm...that’s a little subjective. Maybe use something less disputable, like the length of the applause they get in seconds.”

“Yes!” Mike said, jumping up in excitement. “Of course I’ll need to get a stopwatch.” He stopped talking as soon as he saw Will laugh. “You’re joking? I’m totally serious!”

“Well, I was, but if it works, go for it!” And with that, Mike pulled out his notebook to jot down a few research questions. This was going to make the class all the more bearable. Will even chimed in and came up with a few of his own. Everything would be fine.

Before he knew it, class was about to start, and Mike made his way to the black box theater in the art building.

He looked around the class. Since it was a small university, he knew a few people. Troy and James, the idiots down the hall that he had to report to the university for possession of illegal substances twice. They’d beat the crap out of him if they couldn’t get booted out of the university for it. Then there was Leslie Young, the girl who lived in the dorms downstairs who Mike couldn’t help but find terribly beautiful, even if she wasn’t always the nicest. She’d flirt with him whenever she wanted to sneak some beer into her room, which Mike knew wasn’t allowed, but as long as people were quiet he let it slip sometimes (and if their hair smelled like strawberries and they stepped close to him while they honestly approached the subject). There were a few other people he knew from physics classes; he supposed they needed their art requirement as well.

Mike took a seat next to his friend Rich from most of their physics classes, who was nice enough, although very quiet. Rich seemed equally unenthusiastic about having to register, and they were in the midst of venting about this when their professor walked in.

She was a beautiful woman who looked like she was teetering on middle age. Dark skin, a fit, chiseled body, and a lovely symmetrical face greeted everyone with gusto and the kind of volume and enthusiasm that must have been seasoned on stage.

“Welcome, everyone, to Acting I. If you’re not supposed to be in Acting I, feel free to hang out, although you won’t be getting credit. But, hey, we can all use a bigger audience, can’t we?” It wasn’t that funny, but the class let out good natured chuckles since her personality rendered it necessary. “I’m Dr. Josephine Brennan, but, please, please, for the love of all the Thespian Gods in the universe, do NOT call me Dr. Brennan or professor. Just call me Jo. We’re equals on stage and we’re equals here.”

She jumped on stage with incredible confidence, and Mike couldn’t help but be a bit envious and awed by her. He wished he was that sure of himself, that graceful, that cool.

“We’re going to start by having a first date with the stage if you will. You’ll be on it a lot this semester and you’re going to have to be vulnerable. You will come on this stage for a minute or two each and I’m going to ask you a few questions. I’ll tell you what they are now...”

Oh, no...

Questions...

What if Mike didn’t have good answers? What if he didn’t want to answer?

“Number one, what is your name?”

Easy.

He could do that.

“Number two, how is your love life?”

That elicited a few giggles and some cat calls around him, but it put a lump in Mike’s throat.

Oh, shit.

That was the last thing he wanted to answer.

For a 20-year-old, Mike’s love life was abysmally bland. He’d made

out with one girl before graduating high school; they always flirted a bit and let it out of their systems at a party, but they stopped at what Dustin later swore was classified as second base. There was a girl named Rebecca who was obsessed with him in the physics program, but she was a nasty gossip who spread nasty rumors about people and he wanted no part of that. He kissed a couple of girls he didn't know when they'd had a bit too much at frat parties and were suddenly into him for not being a total pervert. Being a nice guy was a good thing when girls were surrounded by losers, but they only seemed to entertain that fact when they were drunk.

"Number three, what are your dreams?"

That wasn't bad.

He'd talk about physics.

He knew about physics.

His thoughts were interrupted when the door opened and a beautiful girl walked in...

So beautiful.

He couldn't describe what it was about her, but something about this girl – not conventionally attractive, mind you – immediately intoxicated him.

"Great! We have our first volunteer!" Jo said. The girl looked absolutely terrified upon being addressed. Jo caught her terror and laughed warmly.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie, didn't mean to scare you. We're all about to introduce ourselves here. Since you're still standing, you may as well go first. Come on, honey, let's go. The stage doesn't bite!"

August 28, 1991, 1:15 PM

El couldn't tear her eyes away from the boy who asked what her name was.

They were dark and expressive. Something about them seemed absolutely gorgeous. It wasn't as though they were your standard movie star eyes; they weren't. There was nothing standard or movie star about this boy. He was long and lanky with a warm but an unusual face. She liked it, though. It was sprinkled in freckles and had a gentleness to it. There was something about him, like Max, that seemed approachable. That made her realize how much she was playing with the cuffs of her sweater, which Hop told her never to do.

She felt herself stop.

Breathe in, El...

In slowly...out like blowing out birthday candles.

"El. My name is El."

Okay, good.

She got her name out.

That was good.

The professor, who, though gutsy, seemed nice enough, smiled at her. El, always intuitive, guessed this lady smiled a lot.

"Nice to meet you, El. I'm Dr. Josephine Brennan, but please call me Jo, okay?" El nodded, the sound of her voice not willing to make another appearance.

"So, moving on. How's your love life?"

El stared blankly; she wasn't sure if this was a serious question or not. Was this one of those rhetorical things? Would she look dumb if she literally answered?

She heard a few giggles around her and her face got hot. Her heart started pounding. Everyone just stared at her, waiting for her to answer and look like the idiot that she was.

Words were lost in her throat.

Jo's voice got lighter.

"Are you dating anyone, honey?"

"No," El muttered, and she wasn't. She never did. She wasn't even kissed – not once in her life – and, for 20, El knew that was a little ridiculous. Some girls out there were kissed when they were as young as 12, and El was way too terrified of anyone to have a full conversation, let alone kiss anybody.

"That's okay! Single woman, like me! We've got better things to do!" Jo replied, and winked. El felt her heartbeat calm and looked around. Nobody was laughing at her. Everyone was looking at her eagerly, some smiling kindly. She felt herself smile.

"Yeah," El said softly, and a few of the girls in the class clapped.

Nobody ever clapped for El before.

"Okay, El, last question...what are your dreams?"

Her dreams...

To speak without shaking.

To be a highly ranked detective and take anyone like her Papa and ensure they were met with the justice they deserved.

To be normal.

To find people who made her feel safe like Hop, because she knew he wouldn't be around forever.

She tried to think of just what to say when she felt her eyes fall on him again – on that boy.

He was staring right at her.

His eyes...

She could stare at them for days.

The others in the class seemed to notice where El's eyes were falling,

so she averted them from him and looked down.

“It’s okay, take your time, El,” Jo told her. “Dreams are important; we don’t want to be impulsive with them.”

In slowly...

Out like candles on a birthday cake...

“To be happy,” El mumbled.

It was all she could think of.

She expected the laughter then, the snickers, but they didn’t come. A blond girl in the front clapped loudly, and the others followed suit.

The boy wasn’t clapping, but he was smiling.

What an adorable smile...

“That’s the best dream there is, El, thank you. I’m sorry to have put you on the spot like that; you’ve passed your hazing procedure and you’re free from any more for at least five minutes. Who’s next?”

El walked down the steps, her heart lighter than it was when she entered. Most seats were taken, but she found one on the end not far from the blond girl in the center row. She watched the others go on stage, listening to them talk for minutes at a time about the jobs they wanted, the boyfriends or girlfriends they had or the ones they hoped for, their anger at the opposite (or the same) sex, their insights on life...they had so much to say. How could she get to be like that? She had nothing. After a few people, it was his turn. That boy who asked her for her name.

He hurried on stage awkwardly, as though getting up there faster would speed up this whole process.

“Hi, guys, I’m Mike. Mike Wheeler. I’m a physics major and I don’t really act a lot but I need an art requirement, so...yeah...”

A few people laughed around El, but she felt herself feel a bit angry on his behalf.

He was just being honest.

He wasn't going on some fake speech about how much he's always liked acting like so many of them did.

Then came the question El was curious to hear about.

"So, Mike, how's your love life?"

A few people laughed again. It seemed they knew him, and were treating him like the punchline of a joke. A piece of her hurt a bit for him.

"Well, I'm busy with school and stuff, doesn't leave much time."

"Right, nice excuse," came a voice from behind El. It was a boy who went up a few people before; one called Troy. He seemed cocky and arrogant; he got up on stage like he owned it. He said he was seeing a few girls at once like this was something to brag about.

She suddenly had a pressing urge to punch that guy in the face.

She turned back to the nicer boy – Mike Wheeler – and saw his hands were shaking. His face turned completely red in a matter of seconds. He was embarrassed.

He looked so small up there that she wanted to run up on stage and hug him.

He saved her. She would save him...

"What are your dreams?"

Everyone turned to her.

Those were more words than she managed to say all class. She didn't even know what made her say them. She just did.

He turned to her and smiled.

She smiled back.

"I...I don't know. I guess I want to get his really cool internship at the

physics lab. You know, a good job in physics or as a professor. Here, maybe. And...I'm stealing this answer, but it'd be cool if I could be happy, too."

The boys behind her groaned, but El heard a few "Awws". She turned to see that blond who clapped for her looking at Mike in admiration.

She wasn't sure if she liked that girl anymore.

He stepped down too before she knew it, and the class resumed. Jo told everyone that they would be asked to do a monologue as a midterm, and that they were to select the monologue they would do in the next two weeks. She advised them to look for a story that echoes their own experience in some way, as it's very difficult to act a scene that comes from the perspective of a different gender or someone with a different set of life circumstances.

Her own experience...

Was there a monologue out there about a girl who was brought up by a con man who stole her from her mother, who didn't give her the basic necessities, but kept her just to stick it to his ex-wife, who raised her to distract and manipulate people so that he could steal and embezzle and act corrupt, who would punish her severely if she was bad, which he so often said that she was, until Hop investigated him, took her away from his clutches, and offered to legally adopt her instead of putting her through that terrible foster care system?

She doubted it.

Monologues would be about things El knew of in theory but didn't experience. Falling in love. Liking a boy. Picking out a dress for a party. How could she do that?

After Jo's speech, she put a pile of syllabi on the table for everyone to pick up and dismissed the class. People lingered to ask her questions and talk. Before she knew it, the boy – Mike – was right in front of her.

As sweet and as approachable as he seemed to be, El had never found anyone this magnetically attractive before. It shook her to the core.

His warm smile shook her even more.

“Hi...El? I just wanted to thank you for saving me back there. I’m Mike.”

Yes.

Yes, El knew that.

She didn't think she'd forget anytime soon.

He saved her first, and she wanted to thank him as well, but, as it so often did, speech failed her. She felt herself turn red and embarrassed.

This was stupid. This boy would never like her or find her interesting. She was about as interesting as a cactus. She wouldn’t waste his time.

Besides, she had to try to catch Jo to give her the note she had written about her social anxiety. She did this at the start of every class; had her therapist sign it. Her therapist suggested that this would help her teachers know what to expect and not interpret her shyness as rudeness.

“Excuse me,” was all she stupidly said, and, before she could see his reaction, she walked in the direction of the line of people who were waiting to talk to Jo. She begged herself not to look back at him, as she envisioned that he was put out by her dumb rudeness, but she couldn’t help but turn around

And he saw her look at him.

His eyes looked hurt and confused, his eyebrows furrowed in a bit. He gave her a look like he didn’t know what her problem was.

She turned away.

What a way to make a first impression.

As usual, she messed up any chance of having a new friend in her life instantaneously.

She was thinking just this when a voice interrupted.

“El, El, who wants to be happy – how can I help you?”

She turned to Jo, amazed that she remembered that bit about her. Her smile was absolutely contagious. El had to smile back.

“I just...I wanted to...here,” El stuttered, handing Jo the note. Jo took a look at it, gave the first paragraph a read, then her smile faded a bit.

She turned to El, her smile still there, but her eyes a bit more serious.

“No, honey.”

No.

No?

“No?” El asked.

“Look...I get it. This is real. I’m not saying it’s fake. But I can’t excuse you from participation because you have it. I’m sorry.”

Couldn’t excuse her?

But she didn’t ask to be excused.

What was she talking about?

“But...no, it’s just...I...”

“You, El, are tough. I can tell just looking at you. Give yourself a chance to be that powerhouse that you are and don’t let labels own you.”

“It’s not a label,” El heard herself say defensively, trying not to be rude to a professor. “it’s...it’s a condition...”

Jo smiled victoriously at her.

“Wow. One little prompt from me and you’re on your way. You go, girl.”

El smiled.

Jo was right.

She never responded that quickly – that impulsively – before. There was no cure for social anxiety, that was true, but maybe there was a way that she could start to take more leaps.

She said goodbye to Jo, and, with leaps on her mind, turned around in hopes of apologizing to Mike Wheeler...

...only he was gone.

August 28, 1991, 7:15 PM

Mike sat at his desk, going over his notes...

There was no acting today, but he was able to take a few notes.

The ones who were the most outgoing and obnoxious were the first to brag about their love lives. There seemed to be a high correlation between being an asshole and bragging about your personal life.

The people who were on stage the most and talked the most about how great they were seemed to have the lowest IQ.

Whereas there were others.

Others who said the least, and yet, in those few words, said the most.

What went wrong? He felt such a strong connection with that El girl. It had to have been imagined. He was never good with girls; it was never something he mastered in his life. But how could it have been imagined? He wasn't stupid; he was sure from the way they looked at each other that she had to be interested, right?

Still, she totally blew him off. No “you’re welcome”, no “thank you” in return, no words at all. Just an “excuse me” and a dash off to ask Jo a question that she probably just made up in her head to get away from him. Just like every other female in his vicinity, she found him

repulsive.

And yet, he couldn't keep pressing thoughts and questions out of his mind. Should he offer to do a scene with her? Jo mentioned that would be their final project. If he didn't, someone like Troy might and the thought of Troy with this sweet, quiet girl made his stomach do something weird.

Wait...

He didn't know this girl.

Was he crazy? What kind of a sexist jerk was he being? He found a girl pretty within two seconds of meeting her and he felt she had some kind of ownership over who got to be her scene partner or not? That was ridiculous.

He took his pen and made one more note.

The fewer words a girl had, the more they drove him crazy.

And he knew she would.

The next semester was bound to be an interesting one...

2. Enter Eleven, Stage Right

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and Eleven can't stop thinking about each other after their first drama class, even if it didn't go well. When they meet for a second class, things take a more positive direction.

"We all must do theatre to find out who we are and to discover what we could become." --Augusto Boal

September 4, 1991, 11:01 AM

El woke up from an unusually late nap to realize that it was Wednesday again.

She had made it through a good couple of weeks at school. Her criminal justice courses were interesting and her professors were engaging and kind. The other students had already formed friendships and were perfectly content to leave her as vapor in the back of the room. She took her comfortable place taking notes, paying attention to details that could one day benefit her career, and staying virtually invisible.

And yet, a small piece of her didn't want to be invisible to one person.

But she had blown that.

She always had a curiosity about boys. She watched soaps, which were her guilty pleasure, and liked the idea of someone loving her the way that so many men loved Erica Kane. She wondered what it would feel like to kiss someone; to have that look of passion and excitement on her face as she let herself be completely taken into a man's arms and lose herself in them.

Yet, nobody ever struck her that way.

Everyone terrified her.

These people on television; they were content to be in the company of the people that they were with. They were happy to be close. There was no fear of saying the wrong thing or getting the other person to hate them. There was no worry that they would do what her Papa did – love her mother just to get a child out of her and then up and leave, but not without making her withstand abuse and pain that would render her completely lifeless.

She'd never seen love in real life that lasted. Not once.

And, yet, despite all of that, Mike Wheeler – his awkward, skinny frame and gorgeous brown eyes that penetrated deeply through her soul – could not escape her mind.

She was being stupid. Max even suspected that there was something up but El was just getting used to chatting with Max; she wasn't ready to bear her soul to her. She never even bore her soul to Hop and was closer to him than anyone else in the world. The closest she ever came to sharing her deepest feelings was in her therapy sessions, which were still ongoing, but that was more of a routine than a heartfelt conversation. Like a doctor's visit, only this doctor was checking out that her mind was clean and free of any stress. She was a patient. She wasn't a person that he truly cared about in a personal way.

What made it worse was that every other guy in this entire college seemed to be a total pig, solidified by El's intuition, which was sharp as ever. Just the other day she ran into a boy from her drama class in the laundry room; that boy Troy. She tried to carry on as though he wasn't there, but he kept giving her sideways glances. She felt her heart practically thump out of her chest as he approached her, his snake eyes gleaming at her.

She knew boys. She knew what they were thinking about.

She did not want this boy thinking about her in that way.

"Hey," he said, a smirk on his face. "Drama, right?"

Still, Hop always told El that she shouldn't let her instincts make her rude, so she gave a quick nod, and went back to her wash, barely

looking up at him. He leaned against the washer and inched a little closer to her.

“She seems a little weird, Jo, don’t you think? I mean, first off, she’s a college professor calling herself Jo. Think she’s going through a mid-life crisis or something?”

This angered El, because, even though Jo gave her a difficult time about her note, she liked her. She seemed sincere and honest; she seemed to truly care, which El’s noted that many teachers really did not. She didn’t like to hear this young boy who knew nothing about the world talk about this professor’s nonexistent midlife crisis.

A part of her wanted to tell him off for being a misogynistic creep; that, if Jo were a man, he wouldn’t be saying those things. But, as usual, the words did not make their way to her mouth.

“So do you talk, or what?” he asked.

Oh, no.

That did it.

If there was anything El detested, it was other people calling attention to the fact that she didn’t talk. She felt bad enough that she was this way; that her never-ending anxiety made her nervous to the point that words simply would not escape her mouth. Knowing that people were judging her for it made her even angrier, but, as usual, she couldn’t say all of this. She just felt the anger rush to her cheeks, which turned red, and gave him what she imagined was an angry stare.

He laughed.

“Wow, okay, take it easy!” Troy said, shrugging it off like he wasn’t being completely obnoxious. “It’s just...you’re quiet. That’s okay. I kind of like it. Most girls never shut up.”

“I don’t want you to like it, you creep!” that voice inside her head screamed, but her real voice remained silent. It was put on mute by the surge of anxiety rushing through her veins.

Then, before she could stop it from happening, he put one hand on each of her shoulders and attempted to calm her down, as though he could, as though he had any right to.

“I’m not a bad guy...El, right? That was your name?”

She begged herself not to cry in complete panic as alarm bells sounded in her head and she wished more than anything that he would get his hands off of her. His touch was rough and unwelcome. It filled her body with overwhelming heat and made the sound of her rapid heart beat echo so loudly that she was sure the entire building would shake from its heavy thumping.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing, Troy?” came a voice from the doorway, and El was relieved to see that Max was approaching them quickly. She took a step in between El and Troy, glaring in his direction with fervor. Unlike El’s look, Troy seemed intimidated by Max. El was surprised, but didn’t say so, the heat in her rising even more and the tears starting to slowly fill in her eyes as she stood feeling angry and frustrated with herself.

“You know her, Mayfield?”

“She’s my roommate, dipshit. I’m guessing you don’t know her, because if you did there’s no way that she’d be letting you come close to her, let alone touch her.”

“I see that’s where you and her differ.”

“Ancient history,” Max muttered, and El realized then, looking at the tension between the two, that they must have dated at one point. Or, at the very least, enjoyed the perks of people who dated without the actual dating part. “I don’t date assholes anymore.” He gave her a condescending laugh, grabbed his basket full of laundry, and gave El another look.

“See you in drama, El. If you’re looking for a scene partner, you know who to choose.” He walked out, and Max turned to El, infuriated.

“Ugh, sometimes I don’t know why I even bother to...El?” Max softened as she looked at El’s face, which was now dampened by

tears slowly falling down her cheeks. She was shaking terribly. Max placed an arm around her and sat the two of them down slowly on a bench opposite the laundry machines, looking at her in concern. "What did he do to you? El? Do you want me to kick him in the nuts? Because I've done it before."

While that thought gave El much comfort, she just had to shake her head and let herself cry as Max rubbed her back. After a few moments of releasing some much needed frustration, she turned to Max.

"I...told you I have issues. With anxiety."

"Yeah, I know," Max said. "You said you get nervous."

"I can't talk in certain situations, Max. I want to but I can't. I wanted so badly to just tell him to get off of me but I couldn't do it. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing's wrong with you," Max reassured her, looking right into her face. "Nothing, you hear me? Anxiety is a common thing. A lot of people have it. Crippling anxiety. I actually went to psych last week and I learned about it." At that, El let out a little laugh, and then rubbed her eyes again.

"I'm sorry."

"What? We're roommates. No, screw that – we're *friends*. And this campus sucks; friends are few and far between. I have your back anytime, El, you hear me? I don't care if you're able to talk about it or not, got that?" El gave her a huge smile, and leaned in to wrap her arms around her. El hadn't hugged anyone in months; not since she last hugged Hop, which they didn't do all the time, because he wasn't like that. It took something special, and getting her associates degree merited that response.

The rest of the week, Max was as much of a friend as she'd claimed to be; yet, El couldn't bring herself to mention that boy Mike Wheeler. She'd even caught glimpses of him here or there since it was such a small campus. A piece of her wanted to approach him and apologize to him for blowing him off the week before, but her anxiety stopped

her immediately.

But now there was no dodging it.

She was supposed to have drama on Mondays and Wednesdays. Monday's class was canceled for Labor Day, so another two long days had gone by in which El both dreaded seeing Mike, thinking he detested her, and wished she could see him, because *those eyes*.

She woke up and put some actual thought into what she was going to wear, which was unusual; she generally didn't care. There was a shirt that Hop's secretary Flo got her that she said would "flatter her figure" a bit more than the "potato sacks" she usually wore. It was a bit more form fitting, albeit still modest for the average girl – a scoop neck purple shirt that clung a bit more tightly to her body. She put that on along with a pair of blue jeans, and not the incredibly baggy ones. Just slightly baggy – enough to make El comfortable. She brushed her hair neatly and let it fall in gentle waves down her face. She put on a drop of makeup – some foundation and gloss. She didn't spend a lot of time on frivolous things like this; what was Mike doing to her, anyway?

She gave herself a look in the mirror, took in a deep, purposeful breath, and grabbed her bag before walking out of her dorm room and heading in the direction of the art building.

She had no idea what was about to happen, but she was resolved to make this right.

Mike got to drama class early like the loser he feared in his heart that he was, hoping beyond hope to see her before anyone else could get to her.

It didn't matter that she had completely blown him off and seemed more interested in watching paint dry than to spend another moment in his company. That was completely inconsequential. He couldn't get her, her face, those beautiful hazel eyes or the soft, vulnerable sound of her voice out of his mind.

It's not to say that Mike didn't care about girls; he did. He had his desires like every other red-blooded American man he knew. But that's all they were before; physical reactions. Testosterone in action. He never felt drawn to anyone like he did to her. She was...different. He couldn't place it.

He tried rationalizing why she would have ignored him like that. Maybe she really hated the idea of having to take the class and didn't want to get close with anyone. Maybe she thought he was too forward and annoying. Maybe she was pissed that he interrupted her stage time to ask her name. Yes, that had to be it! He would apologize today. An apology and a fresh start!

These thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Troy and James talking behind him.

"In the laundry room? Get out."

"Seriously, man. I mean, nothing happened – that slut Mayfield came in and had to interrupt, she's so jealous."

"They're roommates, dude. That's the end of that. She'll tell her all kinds of horror stories about you..."

Mayfield...

Max Mayfield.

Mike knew her. She made out with Lucas drunk at some party a year ago and the two never really acknowledged it again, although they did exchange flirty smiles all the time. She had a reputation for being kind of fast and loose, but, despite all of that, Lucas said she was sweet, and Mike trusted Lucas. Most of the time.

But, wait...

Who was roommates with Max?

He couldn't mean...

"Whatever, I'll get her to forget. Besides, she doesn't talk anyway. I think maybe she's a selective mute or something."

“Hey, a girl not talking? That’s heaven right there. Grab that shit while you can.”

“Oh, I plan to. Much more than grab if I can...”

Didn’t talk...

El.

They were talking about El.

That sweet girl that stood on stage last week like a leaf in a storm and looked terrified to exist; that’s who Troy was after? That girl who was so far out of his league that it was ridiculous. The thought of that perverted piece of crap seated behind him trying to get into the pants of a girl who seemed so completely innocent and sweet struck a chord in Mike that was impossible to ignore.

“If you’re talking about El, keep dreaming,” Mike heard himself say.

Troy turned to him aggressively.

“What’d you say, Wheeler?”

His face flushed, but he thought again of El standing on stage looking horrified and courage took over.

“El. She’s not exactly your type, is she?”

“She’s hot. That’s my type,” Troy asserted, exchanging a chuckle with James as Mike shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“She seems like a nice girl. Why would she want to get mixed up with someone like you?”

“It’s the nice girls you’ve got to watch out for,” Troy said, staring Mike down in disgust. “What would you know? Not like you’ve ever gotten any action from a girl other than good old Palm-ela huh?”

That painful truth stung Mike, and he really hoped that nobody in the class – much less the girls that were hanging out – heard the very obnoxious (and clue) assertion that he was, indeed, a virgin.

“Oh, speak of the devil,” Troy said, turning to the doorway of the auditorium. Mike turned and begged his mouth not to open.

She was stunning.

She was wearing an outfit that was much more form fitting and flattering, accentuating her delicate, slim curves. Her hair was again flowing neatly alongside her face, but appeared neater and more put together. She had that look on her face – that look of terror and anxiety – and it made him want to get up and invite her to sit with him, putting last week out of their minds.

Her eyes met his, and she kind of smiled.

This was a good sign.

She didn't hate him!

He stood up to walk in her direction, ignoring the “Dream on, Wheeler” and groan from behind him, when Jo entered the room, clapped her hands loudly, and asked everyone to get up and find their own space.

Mike didn't want to find his own space. He wanted to be near her.

He walked in her direction, but, since he was asked to choose his own space, he stopped a few paces from her. Eyes locked, he smiled at her and said a quick hi.

She smiled back. There was relief on her face; as though she wanted him to acknowledge her and was glad that he did.

Jo started a warm up exercise in which she told everyone to put a “glass box” around themselves and start walking aimlessly around the room in response to different prompts. They just failed a major exam. They got a date with the girl or boy of their dreams (and Mike tried to look for her then, but she wasn't in his field of vision). They had a major interview for a job coming up. It was kind of interesting, although Mike didn't want to do a pretend walk. He wanted to be right in front of El again and see her smile.

It was such a pretty one.

The activity was halted and Jo asked everyone to take their seats. Mike looked around for her and saw she was seated. He hurried to sit alongside her. She turned to him and gave him a warm glance, which he returned.

Mike was barely thinking about his “research questions” for the day (participation correlated with talent), or about what Jo was saying about getting into a state of mind where you pay attention to what you do with your body. She also said that you pay attention to your scene partner in little details, and asked each person to select a scene partner.

Mike and El turned to each other and, wordlessly, picked each other as partners.

It was amazing that he hadn’t spoken a word to El all day but felt as though they were communicating so deeply.

They were instructed to stand opposite each other and look at each other very closely for a moment.

Which he did.

Her hands were fidgeting again. Her hands were still pulling at the cuffs of her sweater like they had the other day. He looked very closely at her fingernails, which were chipped unevenly to suggest that she bit them. She rocked slightly back and forth. Her face was so difficult to read; it seemed content, happy – her eyes bright and gleaming – but also scared. She kept smiling at him. It was as if she couldn’t stop. (And he certainly didn’t want her to).

“When you work with a scene partner you need to maintain that sense of attention to detail. You have to notice what your scene partner is doing and respond. So we’re going to practice. I would like you each to have a turn turning around and facing your partner’s back. You are going to change three things about your appearance. It will be up to your partner to figure out what you’ve changed.”

Wow.

An excuse to look at her even more closely.

He would take it.

~~~~~

El turned around and faced the boy she had been thinking about for the last week.

Three things.

She had to find three things that were different.

That was easy; this came naturally to her. One of few words, she had the vision of a hawk. She tried to draw her attention away from those remarkable brown eyes of his and look at the rest. She turned down to his wrist. Would he have made the obvious choice?

Yes, he would.

His calculator watch was on the other arm. She pointed to it, and looked up at him, smiling. He nodded, also smiling, and, with her finger mere inches from his hand, she couldn't help but notice that both of them turned a very similar shade of red.

"Okay, that's one," he said. "What else?"

There wasn't much to change. His hair was long for a boy – it surrounded his face in dark curls – but it's not like it was so long he could restyle it. He wasn't a jewelry guy; didn't have chains on his neck or wrist. Just his clunky calculator watch. His clothes were preppy casual. His polo shirt was once completely tucked in, but now half out on his right side.

She moved her hand close to his waist and pointed there, smiling again.

"Two. I guess I'm not so good at this," he said, and suddenly El felt bad. She didn't want to make him feel like a failure. In a matter of a few seconds she already found two out of three of the differences (and three out of three if she were to be technical; she saw that he untied one shoelace as well a few seconds ago) when the partners on either side of them were still guessing, some of them not even succeeding to guess one. She didn't want him to feel like the worst

person at this game in the century, so she decided to play. She circled around him.

It was also for herself.

She didn't know what it was that she found so incredibly attractive about him. He wasn't her usual type; not that she had one, but she was always one to find movie stars and completely unattainable boys handsome while not paying much attention to those more ordinary. But there was something about his state of being ordinary that was pleasant. It may have been the vulnerable state of him; the figure so long, lanky and skinny that it looked like it would fall over if you breathed in its direction. The expressive eyes that revealed how insecure they were. He looked frail and small; he looked unsure of himself and in need of reassurance.

He needed to feel like he was good at something.

And so she would make him feel that way.

She wasn't a good actress, but she tried. She looked at every part of him except for his shoes. He tried very hard to make it less obvious; put his feet together and drew more attention to them than he intended. She tried her best not to laugh.

"Find it?" He asked. Something about his voice did something to her. It was soothing and mellow; it was like the audible version of maple syrup slowly pouring itself into her ear drums and filling her with warmth and sustenance. She wanted to say no, but her own voice wouldn't cooperate, so she just smiled and shook her head. She continued to focus on his face now, inching closer, feeling herself become gutsy. She leaned her face close to his, examining his hair. The sound of her heart beating seemed to echo as she felt his body closer to hers, as though mere proximity would send her into cardiac arrest. He tensed up, his eyes examining her warmly, sweetly, innocently – most boys weren't like that. Most boys that El had met were awkward or suggestive or weirded out by her. Not this one. Not sweet Mike Wheeler, who she barely knew but could read just as well as she could read anyone else.

"Times up," Jo said. "Go ahead – if your partner missed it tell them

what they didn't see."

She looked to him, her eyes asking what was missed. His eyes changed; softened, but had a sad gleam to them.

"I'll tell you if you tell me something first," he said. El didn't nod, but just gave her a look with her eyes that said she wasn't sure. She shrugged slightly, tilting her head.

"The other day...why did you blow me off like that? And today you wanted to be partners. I mean...I don't mean to be rude, but...is there...I mean...can you speak?"

Her heart sank to her feet.

This is why she preferred lecture halls. It was bad enough that Troy came forward and asked her about this, but Mike? She thought he would be more polite than that – to be so forward as to point out to her that she did something that he clearly thought was as weird as it was.

Yet, she couldn't be completely angry. He was well-intentioned. He didn't know. He was just asking. He wasn't forward and rude.

Unlike others...

Just as she was trying to dodge thoughts about Troy and their encounter in the laundry room, she was interrupted by that pretty blond who flashed a flirty smile in Mike's direction. A piece of her was even more annoyed; not only did Mike have to notice her silence, but now this girl who was a million times prettier than she was

"Hey, we have to switch partners. Do you mind?" She asked El, a gleam in her bright blue eyes, before turning to Mike and smiling warmly.

Wait a minute, what?

As much as El wanted to make Mike sorry for what he asked her, a bigger part did not want him paired up with this girl. At all.

But Mike beat her to it.

“N-no, that’s fine. Sorry, El.”

A lump in her throat, El, took a step away realizing that now she would have to approach a total stranger and ask to be partners. She didn’t know how to do that. She turned around the room to see if there was someone standing alone who she could just approach wordlessly. Everyone seemed to have found another pair fairly quickly.

Almost everyone.

That boy Troy was a few feet away, and it didn’t seem that anyone had any interest whatsoever in pairing up with him. James, his friend, was not nearly as obnoxious, and so he found another partner pretty quickly. But, since there were no other partners left, El had no choice. She took a few steps closer to him. She hoped beyond anything that he didn’t think it was anything more than it was. He looked at her, grinning, amused.

“So...something you want to ask, maybe?”

He knew she was shy also. He knew and he was messing with her.

“I...well...there aren’t...”

“Yes, yes, I’ll be your partner. I’d hate to have to make you beg,” he joked, taking a step toward her. His eyes wandered from her eyes down to her feet and back up in a way that made El feel completely uncomfortable. She took a defensive step back.

“What? Hey, we’re going to have to do the activity together so I’m going to have to notice you, right?” El nodded, although she started to feel nauseous. She knew creeps better than anyone. He wasn’t doing this for the project. He was eyeing her like a piece of meat and they both knew it.

“Okay, everyone, same as before. If you weren’t it before, you change three things and see if your partner can guess.”

El turned, her back facing Troy. She could feel herself shaking, and, within minutes, felt it shaking against something. It was him. His body was directly behind hers, his hands brushing softly against the side of her leg in a way that seemed very much intentional.

She took another step away and heard him chuckle.

“Just change your stuff. I bet I’ll guess in a second.”

El looked down at herself. She forgot; she was supposed to change something.

She folded in the cuff of her purple sweater. A fold was small; he wouldn’t notice.

She moved the ring that was consistently placed on her ring finger to her middle finger.

She took a pen quickly out of her pocket and drew the start of a happy face on her right wrist.

First two long, straight lines for eyes, and then...

“Time’s up. Turn around!”

It was just eyes free of a nose or mouth, but very well. It was still different. She turned around. He took a step closer to her, touching her arm and moving his face incredibly close to hers when Jo passed.

“Hey – we’re using our eyes here. Boundaries.” El sighed. She was so grateful for Jo as Troy took a big step back. In her field of vision she could see Mike turn around and look seriously at Troy. His eyes met El’s a minute, suddenly concerned even though he was asking inappropriate questions just moments earlier.

“Sorry, sorry, it was just...hard to see.”

“Be that as it may, she’s a foot in front of you. Back up,” Jo continued. She took a step back, continuing to watch, and El was more grateful to her than she could have expressed.

“Well, okay, obviously your sweater; that was a giveaway,” Troy said

with a completely condescending tone. He circled around her, Jo taking a step closer, and reached to take her hand, which was shaking. A sick, dizzying feeling overtook El as she felt her cheeks get hot in disgust and embarrassment.

“Boundaries, Troy” Jo asserted again. Other people started to look. Troy laughed and put her hand down.

“Sorry, Professor...”

“Jo.”

“Okay,” he said, not bothering to correct himself, and looked at her hand again. “The ring. You moved it to your middle finger. Trying to curse me out, or what?” El felt her cheeks get hotter and glared at him in disgust. The others around them were finishing up as Troy kept circling around her. From behind, he stood for a prolonged period of time, staring. El wished more than anything Jo would get him to stop. As he gave her an inappropriate stare from behind, Jo continued...

“Troy, that’s enough. You can have a seat. El, you too. Take a breather.” The two separated. El took some deep breaths.

In slowly, out like birthday candles.

Would it be like this all semester? How was she supposed to act when she couldn’t even tell him that he made her uncomfortable? What if he tried to do more scenes and activities with her? She couldn’t be unprofessional and tell him he wasn’t allowed.

In a moment she felt someone next to her.

“You okay?” came that soothing, maple syrup voice again, and it was such a comfort that, for a moment, she forgot she was a little angry at him and nodded. She continued to look down, breathing deeply.

She heard him nervously laugh.

“I used to do those exercises too. When my parents split up. They help. In slowly...”



“...out like birthday candles,” El felt herself finish, when she realized that that response didn’t require any analysis or thought. She simply offered it. She could talk to Mike Wheeler. He possessed the power to let her form words and actually say them.

“Yes,” Mike said. “Sounds crazy, but it works.” He just sat alongside her, and that presence alone made El’s breathing slower and steady. She sat back, gave him a small smile, and found the courage to say more words.

“Thanks,” he replied. “And it was that eleven.”

“What?” El asked, sincerely confused (and even more perplexed that she was still engaging in dialogue with this boy, which was something that virtually never happened.)

“On your wrist. That was the third thing, right?”

She looked down. The eyes to her unfinished smiley face did look like the number 11. He was absolutely right. She didn’t want to tell him she planned to make a smiling face, because, if he thought of eleven, she thought she’d let him think that.

“Yes.”

There was another moment of silence as more partners sat down on either side of them.

“Is that what El is? Is your name Eleven?”

And that just about did it.

For whatever reason, the thought of El being short for Eleven made El burst out laughing. It wasn’t even that funny; just the pure innocence of Mike really thinking that anyone would name a human being Eleven was so terribly endearing and sweet.

“What?” Mike asked, and she was relieved to see that he wasn’t embarrassed. He was smiling, too.

“Eleanor,” she said.

“Oh. Yeah, of course,” he said.

“I like Eleven, though,” she asserted, smiling. “You...can call me that.”

She couldn't believe her nerve. This was the first attempt at flirting she had ever done. She found the courage to look into his eyes and he looked back. They were gleaming and expressive, just as they were the other day, and a smile flashed on his face.

Adorable.

“Okay. I mean, I like El, but...maybe I'll vary it up and call you Eleven.”

At that point they were interrupted by Jo, who started a series of other games and activities, this time all individualized, and distributed some monologues books for them to individually look through to help them choose a midterm project. She asked them to select their monologues individually so as not to be influenced by what anyone else thought they would do.

Then she found it.

A monologue by Russel Davis – Sally's Gone, She Left her Name. All about not saying the things we mean.

It spoke to her.

It was her.

She got lost in it; reading about how people hold everything inside and don't speak their truth, until it maddens you to the point that it absolutely kills you.

That was her. That was every day of living with her awful anxiety that left her dumb and miserable. It was as if the playwright wrote it specifically for her.

She was so engrossed in the monologue that she didn't realize class was over and the other students were starting to leave. Joe approached her, kneeling down to the floor where she sat, cross-

legged, looking at the monologue.

“Find one you like, El?” she asked. El enthusiastically nodded.

“This,” El said. “May...may I borrow it?” Jo thought a moment, then gave El a smile.

“I had planned to make photocopies of any monologues you each wanted. I’ve had these books go missing before. But, if you don’t tell anyone, since I’m so excited that you love it so much, you can borrow it and photocopy it yourself.” She leaned it to take a closer look. “Russel Davis. One of my favorites. You’ll nail it.” She smiled, gathering the rest of her books, as El felt a presence close to her again.

Mike.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she heard herself greet. There was a pause and El extended his hand to her.

“Need help?” he asked. She didn’t, but she took the excuse to grab his hand anyway. It felt soft in hers; physical contact made goosebumps pop on her arms as she felt him pull her up to her feet, a smile on his sweet, freckly face.

“Can I walk you to your dorm?” he asked.

Now, for most boys, this was an invitation to come back to the dorm and try something with her. But Mike was not most boys. El could practically see into people’s heads and she knew that about him.

She nodded, her anxiety not completely immune to Mike. Weakened, but not immune. It was then that she realized her hand was still on his and didn’t know if this was appropriate, so she slowly let it go. He looked down at it, almost disappointed.

Was he disappointed?

It looked that way.

Unless she was just crazy...

"So which is yours?" he asked, reminding El that she would have to speak again. She took a quick breath and smiled at him.

"Rosenfeld," she replied.

"Ah, I know that building well," Mike continued. "I was there my freshman year. Now I'm in Klein Hall; I'm an RA there."

She didn't know what that was, so she wasn't sure how to respond. As they walked in the direction of Rosenfeld, she simply gave him what she hoped was a warm look, and he replied with a chuckle.

"That's...that's' a resident advisor," he explained, and she was amazed that he picked up without an explanation what she did and did not understand. "You supervise the people in the dorm and make sure everyone's following the rules. It pays a bit of your dorm expenses for you. Kind of a pain when people are sneaking in drugs and stuff; I mean, not that I do those. Not that it's bad, you know, if you've tried them. I mean, I don't think people who experiment are bad people, mind you, it's just...you know, you're not supposed to, although my friends and I sometimes do. Not drugs – yeah, no, we're not into that. We get beer. Not to get, you know, toasted but just to... wow, I'm rambling aren't I?"

He was.

El thought it was the cutest thing ever.

And it was hilarious that he thought she'd judge him so terribly for talking about drugs like she had no idea sometimes people their age tried them. She didn't – being the Chief of Police's adopted daughter was a sure way to get her away from all of that – but she did sneak a beer of his once. It wasn't bad. She just saw that as more of a social thing, and there didn't seem to be a point to drinking beer by herself.

"Do you? I mean...you know, smoke..."

"No," El replied, smiling at him.

"Oh. Good. I mean, that's good; it can't be good for your lungs,

right?”

*“Oh my God, he is such a nerd. Why does that make me want to jump on top of him right now and...”*

“So who do you hang out with? Have you made any friends. I mean, you’re new, right?”

A piece of her felt a little insulted that he’d assume that, because she could have been here the whole time and then she would have felt crappy that he never noticed her. Then again, it was a small school. These things were probably blatantly obvious.

“Yeah,” she replied. “My roommate Max. That’s it.”

“Mayfield?” he asked. “I know her. Well, a little. We don’t hang out or anything. She knew my friend Lucas a couple of years ago...”

Mike refrained from mentioning the aggressive game of tonsil hockey they played in the middle of a fraternity party to El, who he didn’t want thinking that he expected something similar in return. El, however, knew her roommate. She knew what he probably meant by that, and a small smile escaped her lips.

“She seems nice!” Mike quickly said, not wanting to be misunderstood. “I mean, are you guys friends or you just sort of talk?”

“Friends,” El answered. “I like her.”

“Good. It’s important to like your roommates. I’ve been lucky; mine are the best friends a guy could ask for. Maybe you’ll meet them one day. I mean, that’s not...I’m not saying that we’ll hang out or anything, that’s...not unless you’d want to...”

They stood in front of Building 3, and El couldn’t help but admire his face. The worry in his eyes, the way his arms flailed about when he talked, the way he seemed just as terrified of her as she was of him, and yet, despite being nervous, something about him made her calm. Made her feel safe. Made her want to talk.

“I...I wanted to talk to you. I couldn’t,” El told him, giving him a soft

glance and hoping he wouldn't mind that she changed the subject. Suddenly it became important that he knew this. "I have...this... anxiety thing..." His eyes became soft, and a relieved smile made her want to melt. It was as if he completely understood.

"I get it," he answered. "I get anxious too. It's why I talk so damn much; I'm sorry about that, by the way. I'm such a wastoid sometimes."

El giggled.

She liked the word wastoid.

He seemed a little offended, but he tried to smile.

"I am, aren't I? Is that why you're laughing at me, Eleven?" She had to smile back, and the two exchanged a little chuckle.

She couldn't remember the last time she laughed with someone.

It made her feel so incredibly warm inside.

"I'm not...it's cute," she said before her anxious heart could stop herself from saying it. Mike's entire face flushed red. He looked like a spotted tomato.

"I'm...wow. Nobody's ever called me that," he replied. "I'm flattered, Eleven. Thank you." He paused, and then turned a bit more serious. "You sure you don't mind if I call you that?" El shook her head, sincerely. She didn't mind at all. She liked that there was a name for her reserved for him and him alone.

"Not at all," she said. They paused a minute, looking into one another's eyes, and El thought she had never seen anything in her life that beautiful before. After a moment, she snapped out of it. She did have a ton of studying to do. Today wasn't the day to spend with Mike.

"I...have to study."

"Yeah, yeah, cool," Mike replied, trying not to look disappointed. "I mean, good. I study a lot too. Biochemical engineering. I know, I

know, nerdy. You?"

"Criminal justice," El answered. Mike's smile grew bigger.

"Wow; that's pretty awesome. I never knew a girl to be into that. That's...that's pretty badass." El smiled and shrugged. She was proud of her aspirations. It felt good to know that he found them impressive. After a moment of lingering, Mike reached into his backpack for a pen and handed it to her.

"Hey...if you wouldn't mind, can I have your number? I mean...if you ever want to...you know, practice for drama or whatever?" El couldn't hide her smile. She took the pen from him, her palms sweaty, and he fumbled through his backpack for paper, frustrated.

"Oh, man, I don't have paper. I didn't bring any notebooks for this class. Do you?" El shook her head, a bit disappointed. She would have liked to have his number. His eyes lit up, and he took the pen from her.

"I've got it!" he said, and he looked at her cautiously. "D-do you mind if I write it on your hand?"

He asked.

Unlike Troy, who just invaded her space, Mike asked for simple permission to write a few numbers on her hand.

El nodded, and she felt Mike's large, soft hand gently take hers. It was a little damp as well. He held it steady with one hand as the other scribbled a few numbers on it. He then handed it to her.

"Do you mind if I get yours?"

El didn't mind at all. She reached for his hand, hoping she wouldn't notice how much her own was shaking or how wet it was as she slowly put her number on the portion of his hand nearest his thumb. Her heart pounding, she passed the pen back to him and he smiled.

"Great! You're not going to wash it off and lose it, are you? Girls tend to do that with me."

*Girls?*

*Who?*

*There were other girls?*

“I mean, no!” Mike replied, almost reading her mind, and she felt herself breathe a sigh of relief. “It’s not like I have...I mean, I don’t... girls don’t...I’m not...not that you’re interested or anything, I mean, it’s just for class...”

*Was it?*

“Mike – I understand,” El assured him. He smiled back and they gave each other a soft goodbye before he started walking in the direction of his own dorm. She took a few steps when he heard her call.

“Hey, Eleven!”

(She had a feeling the sound of that would never get old).

She gave him a look, raising her eyebrows to ask what he wanted to say. Looking nervous, he gave her a warm smile.

“M-maybe I’ll call for other reasons. You know, not class? If you want to...I don’t know, hang out or something?”

If she could turn to vapor on the spot, she would have. Her heart warmed to the point that it nearly exploded in her chest and reduced her to nothing more than the ashes of her former self. She smiled back, nodding, and he gave her a smile in return. Then, wordlessly agreeing that this was a good plan, they each turned and walked in their own direction.

Her heart racing, he feet light, El couldn’t stop smiling. He forgave her for being weird. He walked her home. He wanted to call her to hang out. Was that a date? Was it just as friends? Was he just a nice guy?

She walked into the dorm to see Max doodling on her skateboard again, never out of her pajamas from the morning, turning to El and groaning.



“Good you’re FINALLY back. Let’s go to the dining hall. I’m starving. What do you feel like...” She paused for a moment, giving El a calculating stare.

“What?” El asked.

“You like someone,” Max said, her smile widening, as she stood up to walk closer to her. “I know that look and it screams, ‘I want to bang the guts out of someone.’”

“Max!” El shouted, although that wasn’t entirely false.

“Spill! Who he is he? Come on, you can...” Max grabbed her hand and let out what sounded like an excited squeal, making El laugh for a second time that day. “Oh my God, you got his phone number? This is serious, isn’t it?”

“It’s...he’s just a friend...”

“For now. What’s his name?”

El wasn’t sure if she wanted to tell Max yet. She liked this little fantasy in her head of Mike too much to want it blurred by any reality. Mike mentioned that he knew Max. What if they didn’t like each other? What if she was about to find out that Mike had some secret bit of him that even El – Queen of Intuition – couldn’t identify.

“Never mind,” El said, smiling to herself. Max pressed her with questions all the way to the dining hall, and El told her everything short of his name. She couldn’t believe how much talking she’d been doing, or that a boy – a cute boy – asked her on what sounded like an almost date.

Maybe this drama class wasn’t the worst thing after all.

Still, there was no guarantee that this was a date. What if he didn’t like her that way?

What if he saw her stand up on stage, panic over her monologue, and lose interest altogether?

Her heart started beating again. She got so comfortable in the idea of

how approachable Mike was that she didn't think to realize her anxiety wasn't a small inconvenience like it was for him. Would he be patient enough to deal with that? Would he want to?

She'd find out soon enough, because the next day, he called her up with plans to see each other. Not in drama class, though. Not at all...

### 3. Other Plans

#### Notes for the Chapter:

Hi everyone, it's been a while! Life has gotten in the way of this fic's progression, but I have all hopes to pick it up and keep going with it. It may be a while between chapters, but not as long as the difference between 2 and 3. I hope you enjoy this next installment!

*"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." --John Lennon*

**September 5, 1991**

El had fully anticipated that Mike would be like most guys are rumored to be and hesitate to call her. However, her gut suggested that he may be different, and she very rarely found that her gut was wrong. This time was no exception. He said he would call her the next day, and he called her a little after 10 AM.

His voice sounded as nervous on the phone as it did in class. She could almost picture him fidgeting and fussing with his hands like he did in class as well.

"Hi, is El there, please?"

"Hi, it's El. Mike?"

"Yeah! You're good! I mean, how'd you know; are you telekinetic or something?" he giggled nervously and she had to laugh too; nervous Mike had no idea how adorable he was.

"No."

"I know, Eleven. I was kidding."

"I know, Mike," El insisted, rolling her eyes, still amused at his use of 'Eleven'. Was he this ridiculous or was it just because he was anxious?

“Yeah, of course. Anyway, it’s not too early, is it? You weren’t sleeping, were you?”

That was comical. El never slept much. Not since she was a little girl and slept meant that she was off her guard when I one of Papa’s men tried sneaking into her room and taking stuff or hiding their stash from the police in one of her stuffed animals. She’d cry to Papa that she was sick of it and he always sided with them. Always. Sometimes to the point that he would strike her for being so defiant...

“El?”

“Sorry...I’m here,” El replied, shaking her head and cursing herself for getting sucked into memories like she so often did. Mike was being perfectly polite. The last thing El wanted was for him to think that she wasn’t interested.

“So...you weren’t sleeping were you?”

“I don’t sleep much,” El replied. “I’m usually up super early.”

“Oh, me too!” Mike excitedly replied. “I don’t know why; just an early riser I guess. So that’s good to know. You’re not one to sleep in. I mean...not that I’m saying...I don’t mean to suggest that...”

At this El laughed at loud. Mike was so innocent and sweet. True, he was a man, and she imagined his mind wandered to more mature places from time to time, but the fact that he felt he suggested them spending the night together and that put him into a fit of anxiety made him even more relatable.

“It’s okay, Mike, I know what you meant.”

“Oh, good. So...would you be interested in meeting up for coffee? You were saying that might be nice.”

Coffee.

Caffeine.

Jitters.

She'd be jittery enough around Mike, and he was the first guy she could recall having feelings for in a really long time. Then again, a coffee house was loud. Quiet. Noisy. Too much quiet put El over the edge and brought back memories she didn't want to think about. She'd stick with decaf...

"Yeah. Sure. I mean, coffee sounds great."

"Cool! When are you free? I know this is last minute, but are you free later? There's a really great coffee house a little further in town. Java Joint. Corny, I know, but the coffee is good. I mean, do you like coffee?"

"I like decaf," El told him.

"Ah, to help with your sleep issue," Mike suggested. That wasn't entirely it, but El agreed anyway. She liked happy, talkative Mike. He was one of the few people that managed to stop her from feeling nervous.

At just that moment Max, who had no problem with sleeping in, rolled over on the other side of the room groaning. El should have remembered that Max didn't like to be disturbed.

"I'd like coffee," El said. "What time?"

"Well, I have class at twelve and that's it. I don't know what your schedule's like today."

"No class on Thursdays," El replied. "Any time is good."

"Cool," Mike said. "How about three? Sound good?"

Three o'clock. If it went well, El could spend a good portion of the day with Mike, an inviting concept for sure. If it didn't, it was early enough that the day wouldn't be wasted. Although she couldn't imagine not wanting to be in his company. He was too sweet.

"Great," El said. At this point, she noticed Max was sitting up eagerly, saying something to El that she couldn't understand. Her mouth in a goofy, excited smile, El could just imagine the amount of questions she'd have for her when they got off the phone.

“Okay, cool. I’ll pick you up at your dorm at three. Anyway, I’ve got to go do RA rounds and make sure the floor’s in good shape. I just thought I’d try and catch you first. See you at three?”

“Yeah. See you!”

“Cool. Have a good rest of the morning, El!”

*“Who wishes someone a good rest of the morning? This guy is gold!”* El thought, ignoring Max’s crazy gestures to try to get her attention.

“You too. Bye.” El placed the phone in its cradle, and it only took a second for Max to jump on her bed, squealing, giving her a hug.

“MAX!” El shouted.

“A date! Little El has a date! So cute!”

“Yeah...I guess I do,” El said, smiling to herself. She’d never gone on a date in her entire life, not once. Maybe she should have told him this was her first date? Maybe if it slipped later he’d get nervous about it?

“So his name is Mike,” Max said. “I learned that much from being woken up at this God forsaken hour...”

“It’s ten o’clock!” El shouted, rolling her eyes.

“Mike, Mike...the only Mike I know is friends with that guy Lucas I hooked up with a few times last year and I know it can’t be that guy because he is just...” El gave her a glance, realizing the reason she didn’t want to tell anyone about this date in the first place. Max put two and two together and awkwardly giggled. “He’s the most amazing guy ever.”

“What’s wrong with him?” El asked defensively, pulling away from Max a bit.

“Nothing! He’s just...forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“Max!” El shouted. Mike seemed great and El’s instincts usually didn’t lie, but if he was a psycho who broke women’s hearts she certainly

wanted to know.

"It's just...he's a bit nerdy, is all. I mean, that's not such a bad thing." At that, El laughed. Max was afraid to say that? It was beyond obvious that Mike was a nerd. That's probably what she liked most about him. "What?"

"Of course he is," El agreed. "He's probably the biggest nerd I've ever met in my life."

"Oh," Max said, awkwardly laughing, and then stopping herself. "Then...why..."

"Because I like nerds," El replied, smiling at the thought of him. "I like you, don't I? There was a pause as Max gave El an evil glare.

"You little witch. Go ahead and be snarky on me. But I'm not a nerd. That boyfriend of yours, on the other hand..."

"He's not my boyfriend!" El insisted, not wanting to get her hopes up just yet. "He's just...a guy in my drama class. Who wants to take me on a date."

"Where are you going? The museum? To see his ant farm?"

"We're going to coffee," El replied, busying herself with a strand of hair to her side just to avoid Max's taunting gaze.

"Coffee? You? Just what you need is more caffeine."

"I'm sticking to decaf." There was another pause and Max placed her head affectionately on El's shoulder, giving her a little hug.

"I'm sorry I'm a bitch, El..."

"You're not a bitch..."

"It's just I want you to know...I mean, you know you're gorgeous, right? And cool? You can have whoever you'd like."

"That's not true," El continued.

“Sure it is. I don’t know if you notice the way boys here look at you,” Max continued. El did, but she didn’t see it as any kind of personal triumph. Boys looked at girls that way. Boys who had only one thing on their minds. Mike wasn’t like that. Well, she was sure that he had that on his mind sometimes, but, truth be told, when she spoke to him, the thought shadowed its way into her mind as well. Especially when she became jittery and nervous.

“I prefer the way Mike looks at me,” El continued.

“I bet he does,” Max continued. “He’ll want to rip your clothes off as quickly as he tears the cover off of his TI-82.”

“MAX!” El shouted, feeling herself turn pink. A date was a huge step for her; she didn’t need to think about the ultimate progression of their relationship.

“Oh, please, that won’t happen yet. He’s too nerdy. Just...does he know about...I mean...”

“I told him I have anxiety,” El answered, knowing exactly where Max was going with this.

“Yes, but does he know you have attacks? Like...will he be prepared if you have one and you’re set off in the midst of coffee?”

El hadn’t thought about that. Sometimes the smallest things set her off. A fear that the place she was in wasn’t safe. A reminder of her childhood; a sound, a smell, a vision. Things that would send her into flat out panic mode. She wasn’t exactly that clear with him.

But Mike was good. He was soft and gentle. She didn’t envision that she would be that anxious around him.

“He knows. He’ll be fine.

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Mike Wheeler was freaking out.

It had been a while since he had taken a girl out and he was completely out of practice. Maybe he should have waited a few days.



Gotten to talk to her on the phone a bit more. But he just couldn't help himself with El. She was just so beautiful. Something about her voice was so sweet and pure and good...he just wanted to be with her.

He knew he was especially jittery in chemistry that day and Lucas kept giving him sideways glances to ask what was wrong. Lucas knew something was up as soon as they were getting ready to leave the dorm that morning. All morning he had asked Mike what bug crawled up his ass, but, despite generally telling Lucas everything, he was nervous to mention El around him.

After class, Lucas had given up on being polite.

"Mike, what the hell is with you today? You kept clicking on that pen in class; I was seconds away from taking it away from you. What's up?"

"It's...nothing."

"Come on, you're obviously freaking out about something. What is it?" Mike breathed in deeply and breathed out as they exited the classroom. He supposed it wouldn't be too bad to tell Lucas. He was an adult. Lucas was an adult. This was no big deal.

"I'm taking a girl out for coffee today," Mike answered. Lucas raised his eyebrows, surprised. Mike cursed Lucas for his blunt honesty under his breath.

"You're...wow. I mean, good for you, man, that's awesome. So...why are you freaking out?"

"Because I'm taking a girl out for coffee today!" Mike answered. "I don't know if you've noticed, but I kind of suck with girls. I'm not like you."

"Like ME?" Lucas asked, his eyebrows furrowed in confusions. "Dude, are you serious? It's not like I have a line around the corner waiting for me."

"You've at least been with a girl before."

“Yeah. A girl. One.”

“You’ve hooked up with more...”

“Look, it’s no big deal. It’s not like I have a girlfriend or anything; I’ve never had anything serious. I mean, it’s just coffee anyway. What’s the big deal?”

“I just...I don’t want to screw it up. This girl; I don’t know. She seems special.”

“On this campus?” Lucas asked with surprise. Mike couldn’t help but laugh. The two of them haven’t had much luck in the girl department and they always joked about it.

“Right? Well...she’s new. Her name is Eleanor, but she goes by El.”

“El...El...oh, is that Max Mayfield’s roommate?”

“Yes,” Mike replied, looking at Lucas quickly to interpret his reaction. Lucas had an excited smile on his face.

“Holy shit, you’re dating Maxine Mayfield’s roommate? That douchebag Troy Harrington won’t stop talking about how hot she is.”

Mike pretended he didn’t hear that; he was furious enough that Troy made a point of talking about her in front of him at acting class. He didn’t need to hear that Troy was discussing her with other people outside the class.

“What a dick,” Mike muttered.

“Well, she obviously doesn’t like him,” Lucas continued. “She’s going on a date with you, isn’t she?”

“She doesn’t like him at all,” Mike pointed out, giving Lucas a dark stare. “Not even a little.”

“Okay, okay, chill, will you? Nobody likes Troy, I get it. Look...just be cool, okay? Don’t...ramble like you do.”

“I don’t ramble!” Mike lied defensively. Lucas looked at him and

raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "That much."

"You do. But, who knows, maybe she finds it cute or something. In that case, go with it..."

"You really suck at advice, Lucas, you know that?" Mike asked. He ignored Lucas's laughter and couldn't escape the notion of Troy discussing El – his El – or, well, the El he was taking on a date anyway – in that way. She was so good and sweet and kind. For anyone to be a pig toward her infuriated him.

But he wouldn't talk about that. He wouldn't talk about much. He would pick El up, they'd go on their date, and everything would be fine...

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"Wait, I've got it," Mike told El later that day. He had driven in front of her dorm building to pick her up. El tried to ignore Max mouthing "nerd" on the couch behind her and paid attention instead to Mike. His eyes looked happy and excited. He was a bit jittery, like he already had a ton of coffee. He was wearing a polo shirt that was loose and baggy around his skinny frame and fitted jeans. She hoped her jeans and black T shirt weren't too informal, but he immediately told her she looked great, which turned her a deep shade of pink. They said their goodbyes to Max and were on their way.

As El reached for the passenger side door, Mike walked alongside her and reached out his hand to open it for her.

El had never seen anyone do that. Hopper was very rough around the edges and didn't do old fashioned chivalry like that. She never complained. Still, it was nice to see that Mike was the type to hold doors for her.

"You didn't have to," El said. Mike blushed and smiled.

"My mother would kill me if I didn't," he joked, and gently shut the door before approaching the driver's seat. El glanced around his car; eyeing her surrounding area carefully and in great detail was a habit she'd had since her dad's days of exploitation as a baby. He had an

air freshener tree hanging from the windshield, but she suspected it had been up for a while since there was no perfumy scent in the car. The car was dated; it must have been from the mid 80s. The front seat was like one long bench, and the length of the car looked similar to that of an army tank. The maroon upholstery and dashboard was extremely loud despite being faded.

"I'll put on the radio. Any particular music you like? It's corny, but I kind of like the oldies station."

"Me too," El agreed. She loved listening to some of Hop's old music when they went on car rides. They exchanged a smile and Mike started driving as they listened to a few commercials between songs.

"So how was your day so far?" Mike asked, and El gave him a smile. He was something else. Nobody was ever this nice to her, not even Hop.

"Okay," El replied. "I did some studying. I have a test on Monday."

"Oh. You feel like you know the material? You feel prepared?" El shrugged. She never felt prepared. She always did well but she always had a feeling she could study more.

"I guess. I'm never sure if I studied enough."

"I study a lot too. It's a drag; I mean, they always talk about college being this fun time and all, but it's like I never stop working. You know?" El nodded. She felt the same way; not a moment of college – whether here or at her old school – was fun. It was all studying and work.

At that point "Something" by The Beatles came on. El let out a soft, happy sigh.

"You like this song?" Mike asked, looking at her with a big smile.

"It's my favorite," El answered, and it truly was. She used to repeat it on Hop's record player constantly to the point that he'd fear getting a scratch in his record.

"I love this one too. The Beatles were great," Mike continued.

"Everyone likes Lennon and McCartney songs the best but I sometimes think George was the most talented of anyone." El nodded. Hop had said something like that once too. She did like George's songs.

"Is George your favorite?" El asked, not even believing that she was the one asking the questions. She never asked the questions.

"Ringo," Mike answered. "He was funny. Plus, I love all the movies and he was always the one to act the most in them."

"I never saw the movies," El answered honestly. Mike gave her a scandalized look as they reached the stop sign.

"Okay, date's over," he joked. "Out of the car."

"Stop!" El replied, laughing back.

"No, seriously. I'll get coffee alone." He couldn't keep it going for long, though, and he laughed too. "Yeah, no, I'm kidding. Although you do have to see those movies. A Hard Day's Night is my favorite; it was hilarious."

"They were funny?" El asked. She knew the music but didn't know much about them as people.

"They were hilarious. Dry British humor, though, not, like, ha-ha funny." El giggled a little and he couldn't conceal his smile, either. El suspected he liked to make her smile, and that made her feel extremely warm. "What?"

"What's ha-ha funny?" El asked.

"You know – like...slapstick, sitcom type funny."

"I've never heard of ha-ha funny," El insisted. On the way to the coffee house, they continued bantering and joking, and El felt a sense of freedom she never felt before. She liked this. She liked laughing with someone. She liked laughing at herself. She liked laughing at someone else who wasn't offended by it.

She liked Mike.

Their date hadn't even started and she liked him already.

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"Man, that was good!" Mike looked with satisfaction at the crumbs left on his plate after he had a huge piece of coffee cake with his coffee. El had enjoyed her decaf and chocolate chip muffin. The place he suggested was cozy and sweet; full of big, fat couches and dim lighting. It was not too small but not terribly big, either. It had an old-fashioned, unconventional, rustic charm to it. Much like Mike himself.

She was even more drawn to him than she was before.

Conversation flowed so easily with him, and it never did. Not with anyone. She never felt that comfortable before.

He could tell she was thinking about something, and leaned forward on the table.

"Penny for your thoughts," he said. "Although that's a cheap deal; who'd share their deepest thought for a cent?"

"Most people share them for free, so it's a pretty good deal," El said. Mike nodded, impressed by her logic.

"Touche. Listen, I'll be right back, I think I'm supposed to pay the bill up front."

"I'll come with you," El agreed. She didn't like being out in a public place alone and feared that being by herself may set her off.

"Well...I need change for tip and I don't want them to think we've stiffed them." El reached into her pocket to hand him some money, but he gave her a disapproving look. "Get out of here, El."

"What?" El asked.

"Are you even thinking of giving me money?" Mike asked. El innocently nodded.

"Well..yeah, why not?"

“Because I’m taking you for coffee, silly,” Mike replied. “Let me take you out. Stay here; I’ll be right back.” With that, he left the table and walked toward the front with the bill.

Hop told El to be wary of boys who wanted to pay for dinner, because it often meant that they wanted to be repaid later. El wondered if that carried over to coffee. But, no, not Mike. He didn’t seem the type to take a girl out just to get something out of her later. Not at all. And El could tell types; she was rarely wrong.

Speaking of, there was a type across from her that seemed the polar opposite.

He was a bit older; sitting alone. She was staring into space not realizing that her glance went in his direction. He glanced at her back and gave her a flirty smile. She averted her eyes hoping he’d just forget that she was staring into space and looking at him. She sipped the bit of her coffee that was left, then turned around again. His eyes were still on her. Looking at her. Almost looking through her. She knew that look. She’d been looked at that way before. She didn’t like it.

What if he got up and tried to say something to her? What if he thought that she was flirting with him and was going to tell Mike that? What if he marched right over and ruined this date?

El knew something would go wrong. Terribly wrong. Mike was such a nice guy and she so enjoyed his company, but she was a mess. A socially awkward mess who didn’t deserve to be on a date with someone so sweet, so wonderful.

She was a screw up...

*“Why, El, do you have to be such a damn screw up?”*

*Papa had been angry before, but not like this. He was practically fuming, steam cascading from his ears. They had told her to be quiet when they took her on a sale in the car so that the other customers didn’t see them dragging a kid along. Most big buyers didn’t like kids getting invested in their business; kids were always their limit. But then she had to go and cough. She had begged Papa for a cough drop and he ignored her, as*

*always. The customer – a huge buyer – went crazy; reminded them that he didn't deal with dealers who involved kids and they lost everything. The thousands upon thousands of dollars they would have gotten.*

*"Papa, I'm sorry!" she wailed. "I...I just had to cough..."*

*"I told you no noise, Eleanor. None! I told you if you wanted those dolls and dresses and all the fancy things I get you that you have to do one simple thing and shut your damn mouth..."*

*"But Papa..."*

*"Enough!" And then he struck her. It wasn't the first time Papa's hand met her face, but it was sharper and harder than usual. She felt its sting burn on her face, which was almost the worst part. The worst was seeing Papa look satisfied; look content that he had given her – a seven-year-old girl – exactly what he felt she deserved.*

*"If it happens again, it will be worse. You stay in here and think about what you've done." He left her room and slammed the door, locking it behind him. El would have cried. Tears would have fallen down her face like waterfalls, but she was in too much pain. The burn on her cheeks deepened and worsened, but not as much as the bruise on her heart..."*

*"El! El, can you hear me? El!"*

*Her vision came back. Slowly. Light went from blurry to clear and she saw Mike above her, looking worried into her face.*

*She blacked out.*

*Again.*

*It wasn't the first time. El was prone to anxiety-induced blackouts that followed painful flashbacks. She just wasn't used to anyone but Hop being there when it happened.*

*Her heart started pounding in her chest. She did it. She ruined her date, and it was going so well. Ruined it with her stupid thoughts and fears and anxiety.*



Another person was on the other side of her, who she assumed worked for the restaurant. She felt Mike's hand on her arm, strong and sweet, and couldn't decide whether to feel moved or terrified that she'd never get the chance to feel it again.

"Should we call an ambulance?" came an unrecognized voice from next to her.

"I'm fine," El insisted.

"But...El, are you sure? I mean, you just..."

"I'm fine," El asserted, standing up straighter, ignoring how light headed she was. "It's...low blood sugar. It happens sometimes. I'll be fine." Mike exchanged nervous looks with the staff member and she looked at him seriously. "Really, Mike, I'm okay."

"Let's get you some air," Mike said, holding her by the arm and leading her outside. He thanked the wait staff and directed her outside the coffee house to a bench on the sidewalk. He sat her down first before sitting alongside her and looking at her cautiously.

"El, what..."

"I told you I have anxiety," El answered, looking at him apologetically. "I...didn't mention I have panic attacks. Sometimes."

"I...gave you a panic attack?" Mike asked. "Did I say something to..."

"No, no! Mike, no!" El insisted, reaching for his hand and hardly believing her nerve. "You're...you're wonderful and sweet and I'm so sorry. There was a man...he was...looking at me funny and...I know it sounds crazy, it's just...I've had...bad people in my life. Who have done things. And sometimes, little things...I don't know, they remind me of them. Not you." She tried to stop tears from forming in her eyes, but they fell anyway. She felt Mike's arm land around her shoulder, and leaned in closer to him. "I can understand if you're...freaked out or whatever."

"Freaked out...El, no! I just...I feel horrible. I feel terrible that bad people did things to upset you. If you ever want to talk about it, I'm here. I mean, I can understand if you don't want to but...God, no, I'm

not mad at you because you had bad things happen to you. That's terrible." There was a pause. El hoped he would understand if she didn't want to talk about Papa just yet, but she couldn't imagine him not. He was just so kind; not like anyone she'd ever met. The thought made more tears fall from her eyes. "Hey, El...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you upset."

"I'm not upset. It's just...you're so...ugh, you're so nice," El cried, and that prompted a smile from Mike.

"You're...sad that I'm nice?"

"N-no!" El replied, laughing and crying at the same time. "I'm just...I'm..." she looked into his deep brown eyes, poring into her in both concern and slight amusement. A wave of emotion crashed into her. She'd never been this drawn to anyone or anything before. Impulses never hit her; she was too logical, but she couldn't suppress it.

She leaned in quickly and pressed her lips against his, the taste of her tears leaking into the cracks that formed between their mouths. She pulled away for a moment, but he drew her back in, placing a hand on her face and rubbing her tears away as he kissed her back.

She'd never been kissed before, but it didn't feel that way. His lips felt so warm, so sweet on hers, as though there was never a question in the world that they belonged where they were. It lingered for a moment, and then they separated. He looked at her cautiously.

"Wow," he said. She nodded, smiling.

"Yeah," she agreed.

"I'm...I'm sorry," Mike said. "You're upset, I shouldn't have..."

"I started it," El asserted. "It's okay." She grabbed his hand and he took it back, and then she smiled wider. "I...I liked it."

"Me too," Mike replied, smiling back at her. "God, you know, this is not exactly how I planned things but..."

"It's great," El told him, squeezing his hand. "You're great." And she leaned in again, letting herself get lost in Mike Wheeler's sweet,

gentle kiss again. Not thinking about how, later, Max would not understand how a panic attack and crying session could lead to what was described as the best first date ever, not thinking about how the two would spend the rest of the evening laughing and talking until he had to get home to fulfill his RA duties, not thinking about how she was now thoroughly addicted to Mike Wheeler. Just thinking about how perfect life was when her lips found his, and how she could be that way forever without protest.